

Katrin DeBakey interviewed by Donald A. B. Lindberg, March 30, 2010, in Houston, Texas

Lindberg: Thanks very much for taking the time to grant us this interview. As you know, we're developing the history of your husband and along with that, to some extent, the history of cardiovascular surgery in the US, because he was pretty central to that. So we have a lot of material that he's granted about the development of surgery, the development of the medical center, things that are medically interesting, I guess I would say, but he did many exciting things, of course, outside as well. Did you make some of these trips to Europe?

DeBakey: Yes, very much so. For many years I did all the trips with him, and I learned a lot. I went also to the lecture which he gave then over in China or so, and so I listened to it and had many questions of course, because I'm not an MD and so not a surgeon and so he explained that and mostly somewhere in a restaurant or a hotel, he drew things up on a napkin to show me and explain it to me.

Lindberg: What was the China trip like?

DeBakey: When we were on a longer trip there [China], I went to see the pharmacies, which are highly interesting. They have cherry stems and they have all kind of those things which we know and which we don't know of.

Lindberg: Yeah, Mary liked that, too, the pharmacy.

DeBakey: Yeah, and then I just got a pretty good idea, and my husband was a little bit kidding, but on the other hand he was very understandable because his parents had in Lake Charles a pharmacy where he helped as a child, so he has interest on that as well. He did see the acupuncture done to put the--like anesthesia, and he wouldn't believe it. He would talk with the patient, and he found that really outrageous, and the operation was then done and very simple, all that. When he went 15 years later there [China] he said, "So you still doing the [acupuncture] anesthesia?" And they were, "No, we are now doing the Western medicine, so we do anesthesia now."

Lindberg: Yeah, I've heard him tell that tale. It's almost too bad, isn't it?

DeBakey: Yeah, when my husband was sick we consulted with a German doctor who is very firm in Chinese medicine, and he worked with my husband during the last three years, and he told us that he goes to China to teach the Chinese people Chinese medicine back because they lost it and changed it into Western medicine. But they are interested to learn it back.

Lindberg: So do you have an interest in comparative and alternative medicine?

DeBakey: Yes, I do.

Lindberg: What do you think?

DeBakey: Well, I think it's a wonderful thing and why not healing with the most simple things, just God gave it all, the herbs they're growing in Europe on the side of the street. [In German] that means so many natural -- all those things, and one can use it.

If you have a broken leg, you'd just rather go to the MD and have that done, or if you have a massive heart disease you have to have it done, but you can start with the children to eat better, to walk better, to love your neighbor, and I mean that. That has to be really done, and then the people will already feel better and that is not homeopathic or preventive medicine, but it just belongs together, the whole universe belongs together, the herbs and the food and the drinking and the enjoying life and partner and friends, that all goes together.

Lindberg: Yeah, I know that you have your own point of view, and I'm glad that you express it that way. Could you tell us what Dr. DeBakey, what Michael was most proud of in all of the things he did? He did so many wonderful things. Got many awards and so forth. Was there anything really special for him?

DeBakey: In the professional life, I think just to stay healthy brain-wise and body-wise, so that he could do this, what he loved most on earth, to do surgery, to help the people who need it and to make them -- it's a big thrill for a doctor and for my husband as well to see a sick child who has not long to live with a hole in the heart or so, and then to fix it, and get a letter 10, 20 years later that the child got married and has children and that was always a big thrill for my husband. But he always followed-up his patients. I mean, I just worked together with a doctor in Belgique on the preventive medicine and he said that is an interest -- he's an MD -- and it's an interesting one. I just saw a patient who showed me a letter that Dr. DeBakey sent to this doctor that the patient got operated when she was four years old, and when the operation was done and she was back in Belgique, my husband would call and write a letter that he showed me to the doctor to say please inform me what is -- and how is the patient doing. So he would follow-up and this is just a wonderful thing. That's why there's so much great paper -- he could follow-up the patient the longest of all the doctors; and I like very much that he is not [only] brilliant with his brain and his hand, he had this big heart for the people. He was a really true genius surgeon doctor.

Lindberg: So your answer what was he most proud of was individual successes with individual patients?

DeBakey: Yeah, to help them.

Lindberg: That's very interesting. So there were a lot of patients to remember?

DeBakey: Yes. What was it, 60,000?

Lindberg: Some outrageously big number, yeah. Remarkable accomplishments.

DeBakey: Yes.

Lindberg: So why did he stay so healthy so long? That was your good care?

DeBakey: Well, yes, maybe so, altogether he was happy, and I think happiness is something good, good for everybody, you know, when the heart can jump and the soul and everything goes together, and we had good food, simple food, and simple is good. I learned over the years how to eat and how to be with your body. It's a present by God. It's that temple given, and one should put good things in there, and treat it regardingly, and also I think he had good genes.

Lindberg: Oh, he must have, surely, yes.

DeBakey: Then God has his plans.

Lindberg: Sure.

DeBakey: And he [God] wanted him a long time and did everything--just shortly when he was in an interview that was like maybe a year or two before he died, he said, "Well, it's just a kind of--there's still so much to do. There's actually very little time in a life." Even so, he got nearly [to] 100.

Lindberg: Yeah, isn't that amazing.

DeBakey: If your brain is working there is always something you can do, and he had so much more to do. He was much interested in developing the VAD much more.

Lindberg: VAD is a ventricular assist device?

DeBakey: Yes, V-A-D.

Lindberg: Yes. It seemed to me that's what he was most keen on.

DeBakey: Yes, well, there was the latest of them. He worked very hard and long already on it.

Lindberg: So will that work be continued?

DeBakey: I hope so. In Europe it is very successful, and I think they will do here, with Dr. Frazier, Dr. Noon--and maybe at the college station [?].

Lindberg: How did you and Dr. DeBakey meet?

DeBakey: We met at a dinner party, which was given by Frank Sinatra for an actor who turned 80, Jack Benny. So I really wasn't kind of invited. I just had a friend--we were with lots of friends in Mexico, and they find out Jack Benny's birthday and so they were invited, and because we travelled together, we all went over there. So I met my husband and we got on very well there, just had much in common, and it was something one cannot really describe. It just clicked.

Lindberg: Just clicked.

DeBakey: Yeah.

Lindberg: But he went away with your telephone number, huh?

DeBakey: Oh, yes.

Lindberg: Good.

DeBakey: So one day he called and he said, "Well, you know, I think I can visit you because I'm around the corner." I said, wow, where, where are you? And he said, "In Iran." And I thought to myself while I was gone, I was in between, in England, has something been renamed in Germany, what is called Iran? Because this is not European standard to come from Iran but he thought he was already near in Europe there, and that is on that side of the Atlantic, and that is around the corner all for him. That was the way he travelled and the way he saw the world and life. But he had this actually rather long trip from Iran, which he thought was around the corner on the map. He came, and I picked him up from the airport and I had only on my car three gears and a dog on my lap, and I drove the most the car gave, and I think he was never so frightened in his life than on that trip. I brought him safe there.

Lindberg: Well, you both like fast driving.

DeBakey: Yeah, but he beat me on that. He had a very heavy right foot.

Lindberg: What kind of a car did he like best?

DeBakey: Well, he got presents because everybody of his friends and where he operated--like King Leopold, and so they knew that he was in favor of cars, and so they gave him--it didn't mean much to him. Just, you know, put the foot up and go, but then the police got him several times, but he charmed the police out you know, when they saw that he was Dr. DeBakey and that he had this wonderful Maserati or Ferrari, so they all--the police and he were playing on the car. Then they let him go. I wasn't that lucky, so I couldn't have that right foot--

Lindberg: You had to obey the speed limits, huh?

DeBakey: Yeah, kind of. If they got me, they got me. They wouldn't let me be kind and like my husband to let go.

Lindberg: So you and Michael have a nice daughter, Olga.

DeBakey: Yes.

Lindberg: Whom I've met and she's now through college.

DeBakey: Yes.

Lindberg: She's out in the world. Is she making you happy?

DeBakey: Yes, she did study biology and finished that, and then she did art therapy because she moved over for art therapy which she also thought was a good one for her, and that is where she will be blossoming in. She finished up there, too.

Lindberg: Well, it's nice that her father didn't sort of oblige her to go into medicine, because sometimes that doesn't do a favor to a child.

DeBakey: She was already asked by friends and relatives at a young age--you know how people are--wow, you're Olga DeBakey. You're the daughter. Aren't you going to become like your father? And she would say with four years "No, no, I'm not going to become a repairman."

Lindberg: He didn't teach her to say that did he?

DeBakey: No, she just figured that out, and I thought it was a rather young age to figure that out. She painted the operating room. My husband was very proud. She was like nine or ten, and it's absolutely on the dot right, so the people who threw the blotter cloth and heart lung machine and the patient and everything -- yeah, he liked it a lot, and he took it immediately to the office and had it there on the wall.

Lindberg: Oh, sure. I haven't seen that. That's wonderful. That's a very good job. Was Mike good at sketching things himself?

DeBakey: Yes. He liked very much painting, and he always painted and did lots of--in the love letter to me, he made a lot of paintings and drawings and--yeah, not paintings, drawings.

Lindberg: That's interesting, because this is the year of celebrating Charles Darwin, 100 years after the publication of his great work, and he was a really very fine draftsman and most of the so-called biologists or naturalists of today took it for granted that they would have learned how to do sketching accurately and attractively.

DeBakey: He did many things. He did--what do you call that with the needle where you can make needle points, kind of very--

Lindberg: Crocheting?

DeBakey: Tatting. He learned that, yeah. His mother was a seamstress, and I think he was interested--he was interested in everything that's going on. So his mother showed him how to sew, how to make tatting, and all kinds of things in that way with the hands, and he saw it, he learned it, and he was best at it.

Lindberg: Surgeons like tactile stuff.

DeBakey: Or a car. The father wanted to keep the two boys quiet, his brother Ernest and my husband, and when they were 14, he thought--they wanted so badly a car so he bought two, three cars, used ones, and he put it in the garden, and he said, "Well, you know, here's your car. Fix it and then you have a car." They were completely demolished, and in no time they had it all put

together, and it was running and going, and the father didn't like it too much because now they were--

Lindberg: Now they succeeded.

DeBakey: --not an age to drive by the law. So they made it working.

Lindberg: That's a good challenge. So that was a good father.

DeBakey: Yes.

Lindberg: Michael was a tremendously strong supporter of the National Library of Medicine.

DeBakey: Yes.

Lindberg: We, of course, are computerizing sort of the knowledge of the world in a way. But I don't think he got to be a computer user personally, did he?

DeBakey: Well, I got him very interested when he was sick. I mean he had all the people, why would he waste time?

Lindberg: Yeah, sure.

DeBakey: He did not go too much in the theater because he was there, and he knew how it works and that was it for him, so it was always the same either a love story or there was a criminal or something like that, so it wasn't anything challenging for him. And so this was the same with the computer. If he had people who can do it, why would he look for something or write a letter or anything. But in the end when he was kind of not that very healthy after the operation. I mean he was healthy but not so kind of doing 100 percent what he did before.

Lindberg: An enormously trying procedure.

DeBakey: Yeah, so I got him interested in the computer. I thought that would be good for him. So I said why don't you look up the Porsche because he was always interested in cars. So that hit it. So we worked on it to find Porsche, where a Porsche and what model Porsche and all that. The next thing was after he got it all going on the computer, he got with his driver, off to the Porsche place and bought one even though he was partly in the wheelchair, but we had it all arranged, and he drove the Porsche even in this condition.

Lindberg: Wow.

DeBakey: So it was the combination of the computer--

Lindberg: And enthusiasm. Well, that's wonderful. One of our purposes in talking with you and assembling the materials that you've given us of Mike's--I know that he was interested in good, young people coming into medicine and surgery and the health professions. And there are other

interviews that he allowed me to do at the National Library of Medicine over the last 10 or 12, 15 years I suppose, and it was with that in mind--do you have something that you would say that would help young people to understand ideally the accomplishments and the thrill and the pleasure that he got out of medicine?

DeBakey: Well, I think what he really believed in is "work harder," and that's because he worked really hard, and that is what people should know. And I think if they are lazy, forget about it. They really have to be beyond. That's a philosophy about life. For my husband it wasn't teatime and cake and having a good time and making a little money on surgery, which he gave right away back away to help other people with. It was like 18 hours, endless hours. If it was 24 hours a week, he would do that, because that was his life. One has to see what is one's life. Is it the teatime and the vacation and less work and more money? Well, he was the opposite from it, and so if you really want to be--and help people in whatever field, then you have to be committed and very honest and question yourself. Can I and will I do that? So I think this is like what young people should ask themselves. There are some lazy people, and they don't want to. Then they shouldn't do it, and that is good then. Otherwise, that would be crippling.

Lindberg: I think he would very much approve of the way you stated that message. There was something that's in conflict, though, in the stories about him. I mean my own experience with him was--which goes back to '62, I think--was that he was just very, very kind, very thoughtful, very wise. I mean everything was perfect the professional relationship as far as I could tell. But the history and the stories are of "Iron Mike," meaning that if you were training with Dr. DeBakey, a lot is expected of you and he may come down on you and be hard. But at the same time, the stories of his thoughtfulness to patients--so is that accurate? Was he both of those things?

DeBakey: Yes, of course, and I wouldn't call it iron. I mean it's just like solid. Solid, that is what he wanted all the way, in whatever he wanted all the way, that's what he aimed of. If he wanted to have crawfish, he wouldn't settle for crawfish out of the ditch. No, they had to come from Louisiana, and so he had them flown in. I mean he just was--it had to be perfect. It had to be all perfect, and that's just a crawfish. So, the same thing with his work. It's just like if he commits himself for doing an operation, then he just does it. If you want to call it iron, I don't think so. I think it's just that was his expectation towards himself. He expected that to do.

Lindberg: And the people on his team, though?

DeBakey: Well, there were probably people who said things like that in a joke probably. A little joke always has something truthful in it. They mean just like he doesn't let go. I mean he just goes after the operation until the patient is good, and when the patient is out, he is going after the patient to see how he's doing and every year. So he was totally committed to whatever he would do. And he had many fields where he was committed. When he played golf, he played golf, and he was good at it. I think his brother beat him, and that's what stopped him. He couldn't lose.

Lindberg: I didn't know he ever played golf. It clears the picture.

DeBakey: Maybe that was anyway the idea. Maybe he couldn't lose. That's why he was so

perfect, and he had to win over everything. Well, everybody does their way, but I loved the way my husband did it. He was also committed totally to our marriage. It's in the same direction. You wouldn't call him the Iron Michael because he's committed to the marriage.

Lindberg: No.

DeBakey: But I don't know. They had maybe other expectations. They didn't want to work all those hours and come back and stay with the patient, and remember the name of the relatives and all that what he wanted them to do; he made them do knots in the matchbox, so that they can really do -- there was no punishment, but when you see about how under what circumstances they had to make the knots when they do a bypass, so good training. I mean the people who have been trained there are very intelligent or not, but what they have learned that is something special and they're special through that.

Lindberg: I think that everyone who got through or careered with Dr. DeBakey is proud of it.